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ABSTRACT

This booklet is intended to help school boards, city councils, and other governing boards establish an effective working relationship with local community councils. In the approach described in this booklet, the community council is created as a legitimate problem-solving group and works with a governing board in continuously identifying and solving problems. Topics discussed include the functions of a community council, ways to get a community council organized, ways to conduct an opinion leader survey, and council membership selection. An example of a council that is linked to a school board is used to illustrate how a governing board and its community council might work together effectively. (Author/MLF)

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Keys to Community Involvement Series

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KEYS TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

GOVERNING BOARDS & COMMUNITY COUNCILS: BUILDING SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Keys to Community Involvement is a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators and citizens. The booklets are designed to help these audiences strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects.

The booklets are written by members of the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratory is a nonprofit, educational research and development corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States.

Information about other booklets in this series--titles and how to order--as well as information about related services--training, workshops and consultation--can be found on the inside and outside back covers of this booklet.

INTRODUCTION

The cry--and in some instances the demand--for more citizen participation in community, government, and school decision making is not new. In many communities the need has been addressed by distributing attitude surveys, conducting public hearings and forming community advisory groups for a specific purpose--to plan the facilities of a new school building, to examine the need for additional parks, to recommend zoning changes and so on.

But many people in public and private sectors are seeking ways for citizens' concerns to be expressed and ideas to be used in more meaningful, systematic and productive ways. School boards, city councils and a multitude of government agencies, faced with diminishing resources and escalating problems, want to effectively tap into the energies and resources that citizens offer. And most citizens want a greater hand in shaping the policies and programs in their communities and schools.

Local community councils can be a strong asset to elected boards or governing units--if their responsibilities are clear and their work bears upon the decisions that are made. In the past, elected boards, such as city councils and school boards, have served as the balance between

factions in the community that held differing opinions on various matters. If you are or have been a board member, you can probably identify from your own experience some of the areas in which citizens' opinions have varied--how taxpayers' money should be allocated for community services, the expansion or curtailment of public transportation and the amount of money required for operating local schools.

Today, however, few governing boards have ready access to community opinion in any systematic way or, because of limited time, energy, resources and other factors, are unable to carefully analyze and consider the data they do receive from the community to help guide them in making decisions. As a result boards often hear only those with the loudest voices whose requests usually represent a limited rather than a comprehensive picture of the community's needs and priorities.

This booklet is intended to help school boards, city councils and other governing boards establish an effective working relationship with local community councils. The approach has been developed and tried out in a number of communities in Alaska, Washington, Oregon and Utah. The results of such efforts have been improved relations with the community at large and decisions which truly balance public preferences with professional expertise.

THE COMMUNITY COUNCIL---
MORE THAN JUST AN "ADVICE GIVING" GROUP

If a community council is to actively assist a board with decision making, it must be able to do more than merely offer advice on particular issues or represent general public opinion. It must be able to function as a legitimate problem-solving agent of the board. This interactive relationship between a governing board and its council requires that both parties operate in "good faith"; as a council brings new perspectives and surfaces new issues, the board should

receive them openly and be prepared to deal constructively with the council's recommendations. The council, on the other hand, should be aware of legal and other constraints placed on the board and should not attempt to abuse its special relationship.

What does this mean in terms of the specific functions of such a council? One important function of a community council is to work cooperatively with the board to identify, plan and carry out improvements. To do this effectively, the council follows a systematic problem-solving procedure.

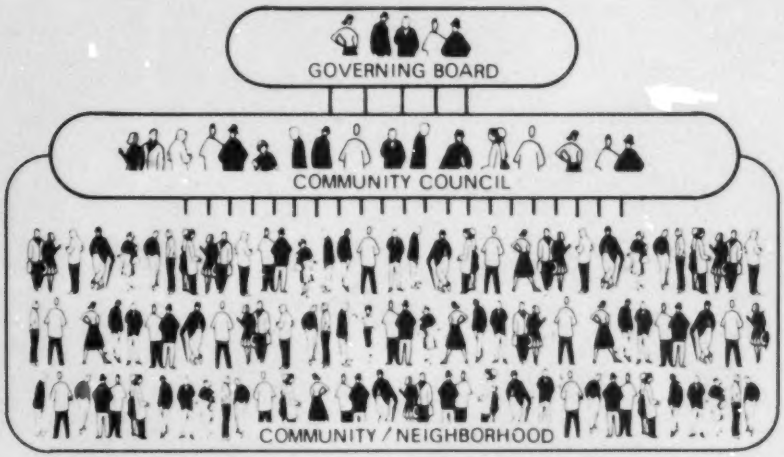
Basically, the problem-solving procedure includes:

- identifying and analyzing problems or needs
- exploring alternative solutions and selecting one that is workable
- planning for action
- carrying out the plan
- assessing the results

Secondly, in working on local problems, the community council combines the views and preferences of citizens with the knowledge and experience of professionals. It brings together people who are crucial for solving a particular problem and instills in the whole community or neighborhood a vision of what is possible by establishing forums for analyzing the issues. It is the council's job to act as a filter of feelings, to mediate the diverse points of view and to translate preferences into concrete recommendations.

A third important function of a community council is to serve as a vital communication link between area citizens and those who are responsible for making decisions about local governmental affairs or school programs. For example, a community council with 20 members can establish an informal communication network with about 200 citizens. Each

member identifies five to ten neighbors or friends with whom he or she associates and communicates regularly. This is sometimes called a "friendship circle" and helps keep area residents informed about council activities. Also, when an important issue is under consideration, council members talk with people in their friendship circle to obtain other ideas and opinions. The following diagram illustrates the potential impact of an informal communications network.



This kind of communication procedure enables the council to get a fast and reasonably accurate reaction to an issue or plan. It is also an effective way of generating positive support for improvement programs since it provides information to many in a way that encourages them to influence decisions.

Different from most other citizen groups that participate in planning or decision-making activities, this type of council stays with a problem until it has been satisfactorily resolved. While the council is not solely an advisory panel to a governing board, neither is it totally independent. It does not erode the decision-making authority of the legally constituted governing board, but rather functions as the arms and legs of the board, gathering data, searching out

alternatives, assisting others, making plans, evaluating, writing reports and making recommendations. Through the work of the council and based on its recommendations, the board is better equipped to make decisions, and these decisions are more likely to be satisfying, high quality ones that are understood and supported by professionals as well as lay constituents.

MEMBERSHIP - THE IMPORTANCE OF A REPRESENTATIVE GROUP

Unfortunately, many groups that are organized to involve citizens in decision making are made up of local power figures or people who already exert a great deal of influence on local matters. When this happens, many citizens frequently feel left out and unable to significantly influence decisions that affect them.

Therefore, if an advisory council is to be an effective method for citizens to participate in local decision making, it must be representative of the community or area it serves. This means that membership is drawn from every identifiable opinion group in the community--parents, business people, ethnic and minority groups, young people, educators, senior citizens and housewives. Research in this area supports the following conclusions:

- Representative participation in decision making can ensure that program improvements and changes are relevant to the entire community.
- Participation and involvement help build commitment and support for changes.
- Participation in a representative group helps council members to see how others view an idea or situation.

- When community leaders gather data concerning their own community, they become aware of problems. This process raises questions about each leader's image of the community and increases the possibility for change.

- A representative group opens informal communication channels across the various community segments.

SELECTING MEMBERS

To get a community council organized, one of the board's first activities is to appoint people from the neighborhood or community to serve as a temporary council. It is advisable to select people who know a variety of others in the community or area and who, as a group, represent an adequate cross-section of the board's constituents. This temporary group has three tasks:

1. to develop "criteria of mix" for the board to use as a basis for appointing members to the permanent council

2. to conduct an opinion leader survey

3. to submit to the board the names of nominees for community council membership

CRITERIA OF MIX

The criteria of mix are the standards or guidelines presented to board members to help them decide on the membership of the permanent community council. The purpose of the criteria of mix is to identify major opinion groups in the neighborhood or community. Each opinion group has legitimate and sometimes different ideas about local affairs, schools

or agency programs. Once identified, these groups serve as sources of information from which opinion leaders, and ultimately council members, are selected.

Opinion groups will likely be identified on the basis of social, economic, political and cultural leanings. Certain groups such as minorities, housewives or low-income people, which are often ignored when "representative" councils are formed, are considered when the criteria of mix for the community council are established. (See *Worksheet #1* on page 15.)

Once the opinion groups are identified, the temporary council has the task of determining how many representatives each should have on the council so that it will be a truly representative body.

OPINION LEADER SURVEY

The second task of the temporary council is to conduct an opinion leader survey. The criteria of mix indicate which opinion groups in the community need to be represented and about how many representatives each group should have.

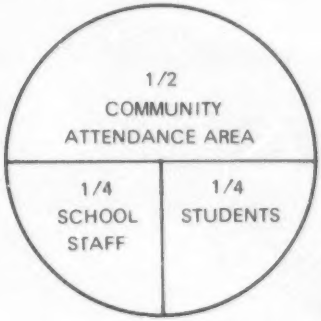
The opinion leader survey is conducted to identify the opinion leaders of those groups. This task includes planning, developing instruments and actually conducting the survey. The ways of doing such a survey range from talking to a few people in each opinion group to planning and conducting a door-to-door survey of everyone in the community. (See *Worksheet #2* on page 17.)

Finally, the names of the opinion leaders and the criteria of mix are presented to the board to make the final selection of members for the permanent community council.

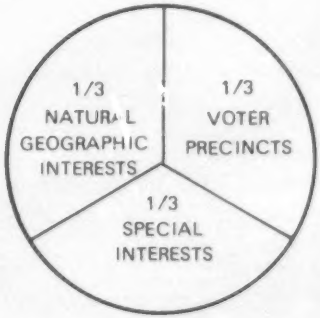
MEMBERSHIP SELECTION

Typically, there are 15-25 members on a community council. The composition might be balanced as illustrated in the following examples:

Example A.* Composition for a community council linked to the school board.



Example B.* Composition for a community council linked to a land development planning commission.



* For samples of the kinds of opinion groups which may be contained in each of the three categories used in Examples A and B above, see *Worksheet #1* on page 15.

While it is the board's responsibility to select council members and alternates, temporary council members may assist the board with both the selection and notification of members. For example, they may be aware of particular preferences among people in the community, the level of commitment of certain nominees and so on. The temporary council can also assist in

- preparing a letter asking primary nominees to serve on the community council
- checking back to make sure that all opinion groups do have a representative
- setting a date, time and place for the first community council meeting.

There is no specific recommendation regarding how long an individual serves as a council member. In some community councils, members have drawn straws for one-, two- and three-year terms. Other groups rotate membership or allow normal attrition to maintain a flow of new members. Experience has shown that as council activities become more apparent, other individuals with special interests and skills offer to help and participate on temporary task forces.

It is important to keep the council a representative group. If individuals representing a specific group move away or fail to attend meetings, the board should fill the positions. If any group or faction among the board's constituents or in the community has been overlooked in the original criteria of mix, the board is responsible for adding another mix category and appointing a new member. And finally, because neighborhoods and communities are dynamic and ever-changing--people move in and out, new ideas and practices are introduced--the board should regularly check to make sure that community council membership remains representative.

THE COUNCIL'S WORK

In the approach described in this booklet, the community council is created as a legitimate problem-solving group and works with a governing board in continuously identifying and solving problems.

Once a problem or a need has been identified, the council stays with it until it has been resolved. In other words, the council follows a complete problem-solving cycle.*

In the example on page 11, a council that is linked to a school board is used to illustrate how a governing board and its community council might work together effectively. Notice that the council remains intrinsically involved in each step of the process, while the board retains its decision-making prerogatives.

Although activities will be modified depending on the type of governing board and the mission of the council, a complete cycle of problem-solving activities is advocated in order for a council to assist the board in making decisions.

* For a more detailed discussion of the problem-solving approach, see the *Keys to Community Involvement* Series Booklet 3 entitled "Problem Solving: A Five-Step Model."

Example C.

COMMUNITY COUNCIL	SCHOOL BOARD
ACTIVITIES	ACTIVITIES
1. Determines the educational needs of the school and community, selects at least one educational project, and reports findings and recommendations to the board.	1. Participates in the needs assessment, reviews the council's findings, and authorizes council to proceed.
2. Seeks alternative ways of putting that project into effect, selects the alternative which best fits local conditions, and reports to the board.	2. Assists the council by examining alternatives in terms of established policy, state guidelines, budget considerations, etc. Board reviews the council's report and authorizes preparation of plans.
3. Prepares plans for carrying out and evaluating each project and presents the plans to the board.	3. Confirms the plans and helps the council tailor them so they conform with school district policies, state guidelines, budget restrictions and so on.
4. Assists school staff in putting plans into operation and monitors progress.	4. Works with the council in monitoring project progress.
5. Assists in determining the results of each educational project; examines the effectiveness of the council's work and relationship with the school board, and recommends whether or not to start work on a new project.	5. Reviews progress/outcomes of the educational improvement project; examines the effectiveness of the council's procedures to systematically address educational needs; examines the effectiveness of the advisory council in synthesizing a wide diversity of school and community opinion; and decides whether to continue the process.

The community council will need resources if it is to do its job well. On occasion, it will need time and additional people to gather and analyze information; to type and duplicate minutes, reports and data gathering instruments; and to make the physical preparations for meetings. In addition, the council will occasionally need financial resources for preparing questionnaires, conducting community surveys or analyzing data. To cover such expenditures, the council should be requested to prepare and submit for approval a quarterly, semiannual or annual budget.

As the council begins to deal with a specific project, the governing board should obtain an estimate of the cost of a project far enough in advance that funds for it can be provided in the annual budget. A close and continuing working relationship between the board and the council can guarantee that the board will not be confronted with any surprise requests for funds.

The board can also help the council by legitimizing the work that group does. The board can give credit to the council by:

- making a public announcement about the work they'll be doing
- giving regular council reports to the newspaper(s), radio or television
- providing a permanent place on the board's agenda for council reports
- opening up formal and informal communication channels with the council
- allocating funds to meet council expenses

BOARD AND COUNCIL RELATIONSHIPS

The relationship between a governing board and a community council can be one of interdependence and collaboration. The council can aid the work of the board, and the board--with its understanding of current policies and procedures, legislation and available money--can guide the council in exploring alternative ways to plan and carry out community or school improvements. A supportive, reciprocal partnership represents the ideal relationship between the board and the council.

Misunderstandings and strained relationships between the board and the council can be prevented by clearly defining expectations in the beginning--length of service; general areas of problem solving; expectations for dates, times and places for progress reports; and general policies and procedures by which the council operates. And it is best if the charge to the council is defined in terms of goals, objectives and outcomes rather than in terms of the means and procedures to follow in doing the group's work.

SUMMARY

Citizen participation in local decision making is not a new concept. In fact our democracy is based on such a premise. Today, however, citizen participation rarely extends beyond voting for school levies, answering questionnaires and working on an occasional service committee. Citizens are increasingly concerned about governmental affairs, community service and school programs. Watergate, business scandals and tax increases

have all combined to heighten the public's awareness and interest in various agencies and their programs. Faced with numerous, complex issues and inflation-depleted resources, local boards are genuinely searching for ways to include citizens' ideas, opinions and energy into planning and decision making.

The approach outlined in this booklet describes one avenue for citizens to become more directly and meaningfully involved in local decision making. The community council has been described as the arms and legs of a governing board. The council might also be said to function as the eyes and ears of the board. With more people involved in hearing concerns, in canvassing for opinions and in searching for solutions, the capacity of the board to make effective decisions increases greatly.

WORKSHEET #1

CRITERIA OF MIX

I. Sample list of Opinion Groups--Community Council/ School Board

A. Community

1. Parents of students
2. Farmers
3. Native Americans
4. Businessmen
5. Adults without children
6. Retirees
7. Low income persons
8. Male representatives
9. Female representatives
10. Housewives

B. School Staff

1. Administrators
2. Teachers
3. Non-certified personnel

C. Students

1. Male representatives
2. Female representatives

II. Sample list of Opinion Groups--Community Council/Land Planning Commission

A. Voter Precinct by Age Groups

1. 21 through 30 year old representatives
2. 31 through 40 year old representatives
3. 41 through 50 year old representatives
4. 51 through 65 year old representatives
5. Representatives 65 and older

B. Special Interests

1. Building contractors
2. Orchardists
3. Downtown merchants
4. Real estate developers
5. Cattlemen's association
6. Conservationists
7. Recreationists
8. Farmers

C. Natural Geographic Interests

Residents of:

1. Foothill, mountainous property
2. Valley property
3. Flood-plain property
4. Waterfront property
5. Coastal property

III. List the major opinion groups that should be represented on the permanent community council. In the space provided to the right, list how many representatives each group should have.

a. _____ _____

b. _____ _____

c. _____ _____

d. _____ _____

e. _____ _____

f. _____ _____

g. _____ _____

h. _____ _____

i. _____ _____

Worksheet #2

CONDUCTING AN OPINION LEADER SURVEY

Five questions are important to answer in planning the opinion leader survey. These are listed below in approximate chronological sequence, with some suggested answers and related tasks.

1. What kind of survey shall it be--

   - Questionnaire in mail or newspaper?
   - Telephone survey?
   - Personal interview?
   - Open public meetings?

   Related tasks:

   - Design questionnaire.
   - Write introduction and interview outline.
   - Develop instructions for interviewers.
   - Contact media.

2. Who should be surveyed--

   - Everyone?
   - Every household?
   - A sample
     --every few houses?
     --every few names in phone book?
     --several from each opinion group?

   Related tasks:

   - Formulate questions for interview, survey or meeting.

3. What information is needed about resources required to conduct the survey--

   - Dollars-and-cents estimate? (see sample on following page)

Worksheet #2 continued

RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

(Indicate which expenses will be encountered in each type of survey.)

	Questionnaire	Mailing	Telephone	Personal Interview
Mileage				
Postage				
Printing Facilities				
Paper				
Phone Numbers				
Maps				
Names and Addresses				
People				
Time				

4. What ground rules should be adopted for the survey--

- Persons responsible for various tasks?
- Best times of day and days of the week for conducting the survey?
- Number of responses that will provide satisfactory survey results?

Related tasks:

- Identify people to type, duplicate, fold, mail, phone, etc.

Worksheet #2 continued

5. How will opinion leaders be selected--

- Total number of votes?
- Number of votes from each opinion group?
- Several opinion leaders from each group?

Related tasks:

- Prepare report.
- Make recommendations to the board.

Note: A sample Opinion Leader Survey Form appears on p. 20.

SAMPLE

Opinion Leader Survey Form

The Brandon School Board is trying to find community, school and student leaders to serve on a community council. We have identified the following as major opinion groups in our school attendance area and need your suggestions for opinion leaders. Please list persons for any of the opinion groups who you feel:

- Take an active interest in school and school-related activities
- Are willing to become involved
- Understand or listen to other people's ideas and feelings
- Are knowledgeable about school issues

Opinion Groups	Suggested Nominee(s)		
School Staff	1._____	2._____	3._____
Merchants	1._____	2._____	3._____
Cattlemen's Assoc.	1._____	2._____	3._____
Students	1._____	2._____	3._____
Native Americans	1._____	2._____	3._____

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